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John J.
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FBI Reopens Investigation Of Missing Apollo Uranium

By John J. Fialka

Washington Star Staff Writer

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has reopened an investigation into the disappearance of a substantial quantity of bomb-grade uranium from a Pennsylvania plant during the early 1960s.

According to a variety of government sources, some of whom have received intelligence briefings on the case within recent months, the new probe began in July 1976 at the express request of former President Gerald Ford.

Asked about the new investigation, a Justice Department spokesman said that it is still under way. The spokesman added that, while there have been "several" requests from congressional committees for the FBI files on the case, "we have said no because it (the case) is still open and involves top secret information."

Despite the FBI's reluctance to share its evidence, there have been several new glimmers of light in the tight wall of secrecy which the government has built around the 12-year-old case. The case first surfaced at high levels in the old Atomic Energy Commission in 1965 when a team of investigators reported they could find no explanation for the disappearance of 206 pounds of highly enriched uranium from a plant called the Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corp. at Apollo, Pa.

ALTHOUGH THE MISSING material caused considerable concern within the AEC at the time because at least 10 atomic weapons could be made from the uranium, Howard C. Brown Jr., then AEC's assistant general manager, halted an investigation into a possible criminal diversion at the plant in 1966 after the company agreed to pay the government \$1.3 million for the missing material.

A few months later, however, the Central Intelligence Agency began pressing the AEC and the White House for an FBI investigation of NUMEC's president, Dr. Zalman Shapiro, a former government nuclear chemist, who had a number of business ties with the Israeli government.

Reached at the University of California campus at Berkeley, where he teaches chemistry, Dr. Glenn T. Seaborg, who was chairman of the AEC at the time, acknowledged that he had a number of conferences on NUMEC in 1968 with then-CIA director Richard Helms. While Seaborg said he was "satisfied" that the material had been accidentally lost as waste and that there had been no diversion, he added, "I don't think he (Helms) was satisfied."

Although Seaborg said he could not disclose what the CIA's interest in the case was, other former and present government sources have told The Washington Star that the CIA's concern developed from reports of U.S. scientists returning from Israel. They reported that Israel was developing a nuclear weapons capability based on highly enriched uranium, the same material used in the Hiroshima bomb.

CIA investigators then developed what once source described as a "strong theory, based on circumstantial evidence," that the Israeli material had somehow been diverted from Apollo.

Helms could not be reached for comment. Herbert E. Hetu, press spokesman for the CIA, told The Star:

"I am unable to confirm or deny any of the details concerning past or present CIA activities. Since the situation is being examined by a number of congressional committees, we consider that any further comment is inappropriate."

Harold Ungar, Shapiro's attorney, said his client would have no comment. Ungar is a member of the law firm of Williams & Connolly. The firm's senior partner, Edward Bennett Williams, now represents Helms. Asked if there were any conflict in the firm's representing both Shapiro and Helms at the same time, Ungar said, "I have seen nothing to show any point of contact between the two, let alone conflict."

THE FBI'S FIRST investigation ended in 1969 when the Justice Department concluded that there was not enough evidence to prosecute Shapiro. The current investigation began after a series of questions were raised about NUMEC within the Ford administration.

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(orig under Fialka)